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Russell Davenport: Survived '41 attack

By JEANNE MAY
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

On the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, Russell M. Davenport was in the motor launch of the battleship Oklahoma, wiping dew off the seats.

He had doctored his birth certificate to enlist in the Navy at age 16, and two years later felt privileged to be on the Oklahoma, parked smack in the middle of Battleship Row at Pearl Harbor.

And then the Japanese planes roared in, and he scrambled up the sea ladder and back aboard the Oklahoma. Five Japanese torpedoes hit, and before the captain could give the order to abandon ship, it heeled over, its superstructure buried in Pearl Harbor's muddy bottom.

"I swam, walked, crawled to the forward part of the ship, the bow, and that started flooding out," he told the Free Press in 1991. "There were 10 of us when we started, and when we got back, there was only one guy with me . . . It was total darkness. Take your hand and touch your nose; you couldn't see it."

He dived four or five times, going as deep as four decks down, trying to find a way out. No luck.

He could feel the ship settling deeper into the mud.

With 10 other crewmen, he found a compartment where pea jackets were stored, and they gathered there to wait for help. The water in the compartment was 5 feet deep.

For 24 hours, he and a buddy took turns banging on the bulkhead with a wrench, hoping to attract attention.

Twenty-eight hours after the attack, rescuers armed with an air hammer tore open a hole and pulled the 11 out.

"I was the last one out," Mr. Davenport said. "I swallowed maybe a couple of gallons of water and oil. I almost drowned before they got to me. They were taking them out fast as they could, but the water already filled the compartment up. I couldn't do anything but wait. I didn't have anywhere else to go. I thought I busted my lungs trying to hold my breath as long as I did."

Mr. Davenport was one of 80 from the Oklahoma who survived; 514 were trapped and drowned.

He was 78 when he died Thursday at his home in Sterling Heights.

On his way home to Wyco, W. Va., after the war, he stopped in Sault Ste. Marie to visit a brother stationed there, traveled on to Detroit, ran out of money and had to get a job in the city.

He never got back to West Virginia. He worked factory jobs in Detroit, then in the late 1950s bought the Parakeet, a bar on East 7 Mile Road. He ran it for 25 years and retired 18 years ago.

He belonged to Amvets Post No. 1146 in Bruce Township.

Survivors include his wife of 49 years, Wanda; three sisters, and a brother.

The funeral will be at 11 a.m. today at the Edward Swanson & Son Funeral Home, 30351 Dequindre, Madison Heights, with burial in White Chapel Memorial Cemetery, Troy.

GENERAL RECALL FEB 1980

RUSS DAVENPORT

REMEMBRANCE OF PEARL HARBOR

Russell M. Davenport, Seattle, 1940

It all began in a 50' motor launch idling between the OKLAHOMA and the MARYLAND which was moored to the keys at Ford Island in Pearl Harbor, Sunday the 7th of December, 1941. The coxswain, Russ Davenport, raised his eyes on that morning to a darkened sky - a sky darkened by the fuselages of Japanese dive bombers, high-level bombers and torpedo planes! They were striking death blows at a major American Naval Base and Russell was there as part of the Pacific Fleet that was based there.

First were the murderous, China-tested dive bombers, straffing the men on the decks of the ships and of his own ship, the OKLAHOMA! Before he could catch his wind, many of his shipmates had been caught in the surge of that inescapable fire - the victims of some gigantic miscalculation. For Davenport there was only one thing to do, and that was to get to his battle station and put up a fight! Going up the accommodation ladder to the main deck, he took in the scene almost unbelieving - gradually becoming aware that this was IT; this was the test of a Navy, a Nation and a principle. His only concern now was to get to No. 4 turret - handling room and man his loading station for the huge 14 in. guns of the Main Battery.

Careening thru tilting compartments already filled with surging humanity, Russ grabbed the nearest stanchion just as the ship took its first hit; a martyr to the deadliest weapon of the plane - the torpedo. Just about midships she received her wound and the old battleship bled deeply from then on. He had to go down two decks to the handling room and the crush of the water bearing body after body almost prevented him from reaching his station. One blast sprayed him with flying metal and he was hit; nevertheless, he reached the *Handling Room* where he and the others dogged down the hatch to cut off the now increasing flow of water to the compartment. The ship was listing badly now; she had been unprepared for this and the three or four torpedo hits were devastating. All they could do was to hang on to the angle irons that ran parallel to the bulkheads.

In the handling room, the men were now aware of the gravity of their situation. Some were unable to accept the fact that they were trapped and a temporary insanity infected the group which medical science would attribute to battle strain. Some of the men raved and wanted to pound at the bulkheads or tear at the hatches - or anything - just to get free! But here there was no freedom; only a war and the unseen enemy, the Jap.

THE auxiliary lights were getting dimmer as the word, "ABANDON SHIP!" was passed. Then a personal casualty struck when two of the men, bunkmates of Russ's, were thrown into a corner to be crushed by 1400 pound target projectiles which had been lashed to the bulkhead. So it was two down and six to go.

The only aid they could give was to six shipmates whom they admitted to the safety - the all too temporary safety - of the handling room. Russ was in good shape and when some of the men claimed they couldn't swim, he let them go ahead of him to the deck above thru a small hatch. Just as the last man passed thru, the ship gave another lurch, and the men who were now trapped in the compartment above were drowned - all six of them! A terrible thing to happen, but the remaining still had a ship on top of them and must be thinking of a way out. Russ climbed to the hatch, but another convulsion sent him back into the compartment in a foot of water. He was now walking on the overhead. The only hope seemed to be to fill his lungs with air, dive down to the compartment next to him and so continue to move forward in the ship and search for a way out. But that meant swimming down and then up to the next air pocket and the question was, what if the next compartment was *completely filled*? There would be no chance of escaping then; that was the chance they had to take, if they didn't want to wait for death in the handling room. To accept the risk was a choice of safety or a quick death; to reject it was to be gradually overcome by suffocation as the oxygen was used up. Of the five men, two of them gave up. He remembered both of them saying that they had lived their lives and the day had to come.

In another five minutes, there were two lifeless bodies wrapped in the mercy of the sea - too young for their fate. The remaining three made it to the next compartment where they joined with eleven others in the same predicament. Three of the men took a grim chance: swim to the overhead of the main deck, find a hatch, cross it some thirty odd feet under the surface and then scale the side of the ship! It was learned later that *one* man made it. There were now only eleven men remaining who reached the last compartment forward; that is, it was as far forward as they could go. A few of them fell into an exhausted sleep only to awaken to find that the water was now up to their shoulders - and the air pressure was all that was holding it at that level!

As the air was being used, the water correspondingly rose. Some very fast thinking had to be done, but *what was there to do?* It was two hours after the first strike by the enemy, and it looked as tho their fate was to be sealed here in this small compartment deep in the hull of the *unsinkable* OKLAHOMA. This was the Lucky Bag which was a storeroom containing all the gear - clothing and such - that was picked up around the ship by the Master-At-Arms, a sort of lost and found repository.

Some of the men again buckled under the strain, and the others had all they could do to keep them under control.

It was some time later when the sound of drilling was heard from above, and the men quite naturally assumed it was Japs. "They must have taken the whole island and are now here for prisoners!"

There was a magazine in the next compartment and two men were trapped there. They hollered that, that the water was gaining on them and then their screaming and scratching ceased suddenly - Russ had heard two men drown and he was powerless to help. The drilling kept up and got louder; two men in the Radio Emergency room were free and Russ and his buddies were next.

The drill broke thru. They had been using drills because of the danger of fire with torches. There was a sudden out rushing of air due to the rupturing of the hatch from the terrific pressure, leaving only the top and bottom dog to hold it. By this time, the water was up to their necks and they were touching the deck with their heads; it was, for the moment, the overhead. At last the air hammer finished cutting the third side of an opening, and they were all released from their watery prison.

Russ was the first one out. Twenty-seven hours of suspense beneath the sea in the confinement of the giant hull; and then suddenly - air and sunshine - the *cucany* was gone!

The old wagon never fired a shot; all the emergency ammunition was pad-locked in the Anti-Aircraft Ready Boxes, and the Torpedo Blisters were open for the Admiral's Annual Military Inspection for the next three days. It appeared someone was at fault; but they had no time for that now; they had to clean up the mess and reorganize for the day of reckoning to come.

28-hour ordeal still fresh for Pearl Harbor survivor

BY JOEL THURTELL
Free Press Staff Writer

Russell Davenport watched the Japanese planes grow from whining gnats to lethal machines weaving low between the bows of two anchored battleships.

Davenport, an 18-year-old bos'n mate, didn't wait for the planes to drop their torpedoes into Pearl Harbor. He jumped through a hatch on the USS Oklahoma and raced to his battle station, a room 30 feet below the waterline where men handled bags of gunpowder for two of the Oklahoma's eight 14-inch guns.

Before Dec. 7, 1941, the Navy had dredged Pearl Harbor's 40-foot depth to shallow for torpedoes to strike. But Davenport remembers the sudden jolt of a jukebox, jolted by the first torpedo hit. Water gushed into the 7,500-ton battleship and within minutes, nearly a quarter of the Oklahoma's 1,354-man crew would die in the sneak attack.

When it was over, 3,435 Americans were killed or wounded, four battleships were sunk, four were badly damaged, and the U.S. Pacific fleet was ripped.

For Seaman 1C Davenport, now 66 and the retired owner of the Parakeet bar on Detroit's east side, the world was literally turned on its head. He and 11 other sailors clung to life for 28 hours in the warship's foul, flooded and upturned belly.

The second torpedo hit just seconds after the first explosion, Davenport said.

"I counted them — there were six torpedoes that hit the port side within a minute of each other," recalled Davenport.

port, of Sterling Heights.

The ship's decks began to tip to the left. At his post in the ammunition room, there was chaos. Above, water rushed through huge holes along the side of the 583-foot ship. The decks tilted more sharply.

A 1,400-pound shell broke loose from its mount. Rolling crazily across the room, it pinned a sailor to the bulkhead, cutting him in two, Davenport said.

There was only one way out — through the deck. But as water filled the hull and the ship began to roll, up was becoming down.

A bunch of sailors fought through a deluge of water, forced themselves through a hatch and to the level above. As the ship pitched further left, several more giant shells rolled across the deck, crushing eight men.

The ship's main lights went off. Red emergency lights came on. Sailors fell to their knees and prayed.

Now the ship was nearly upside-down. Above Davenport's head was the floor. Somewhere under the deep swirling water lay the ceiling.

Six inches of fuel oil covered the water.

Davenport and a buddy swam through the blackness. They made for the "Lucky Bag," a small room where pea jackets were stored. There was a vertical passageway there leading up — no, now it was down, some 40 feet to the ship's wood-slatted deck.

Davenport had a desperate plan — swim deep, squeeze through a deck hatch many feet below the water's surface, and bob to the surface.

Davenport held his breath and dove repeatedly. He could just reach the

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One of Russell Davenport's few souvenirs from his days on the USS Oklahoma before World War II is his photo of the ship. He vividly remembers the Japanese sneak attack on Dec. 7, 1941, that killed nearly one-quarter of the ship's 1,354 crew.

JOHN COLLIER/Detroit Free Press

teak deck slats with his fingers before he had to return for air, coming up gasping.

The 11 survivors in the Lucky Bag didn't know it, but on shore, a shipyard worker was grabbing blueprints of the Oklahoma, organizing a rescue team.

In the ship's belly, their luck seemed to be turning worse. The ship's masts touched the muddy harbor bottom, then the entire top deck of the ship settled into the muck, blocking that as an escape route.

With the Japanese attack long over, the battleship lay silent, a tomb. Now and then, Davenport heard other trapped men rattling on the hull.

"Every little thing I done wrong in my life came back to me," recalled Davenport.

Nowhere to stand. Swim or tread water. Breathing air from foul-smelling

bubbles. Gradually, air eased out. Water rose.

"We didn't give up hope," said Davenport. "We hung in there and stayed with it."

Outside, finally, sounds of help. A cutting torch pierced the hull but lit the fuel oil, suffocating two men in the opened compartment. Next time, they drilled a hole, banging a hole open with an air hammer.

After 28 hours, Davenport and 21 others were pulled out of the sunken battleship alive.

The Pearl Harbor Survivors Association is holding a dinner reunion today at 5 p.m. in the Wabek Dining Room, 2520 Biddle, Wyandotte. There will be a Pearl Harbor memorial service at 7 p.m. in Wyandotte's riverfront park.